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200 Firms Persuaded to Donate

Bobby Aids POW Deal

By JACK STEELE

Scripps Howard Staff Writer

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy is secretly master-minding the massive operation to collect \$53 million in food and drugs to "ransom" 1113 Bay of Pigs prisoners from Fidel Castro.

The President's brother, it was learned authoritatively today, contacted representatives of more than 200 food, drug and transportation firms to ask them to donate and ship the supplies demanded by Castro.

The industry spokesmen were asked to conceal the Kennedy Administration's behind-the-scenes role in the ransom operation and to say only that they had been asked by the American Red Cross to contribute the food, drugs and shipping services.

ASSURANCES

But they demanded and got secret assurances from the Attorney General that the President and the U. S. Government considered the prisoners' ransom effort "in the national interest," as well as a humanitarian gesture.

The Red Cross is actually handling the vast job of collecting and arranging for shipment of the supplies to the Miami area, for possible transshipment to Havana this week-end if the deal goes thru.

Castro has demanded that 20 per cent of the \$53 million in food and drugs be delivered to Cuba as "evidence of good faith" before he releases the prisoners captured in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April, 1961.

AGREED

The industry men who agreed to donate the supplies also were assured by the Attorney General and officials of the State and Treasury Departments that:

- The Government ultimately would foot most of the bill for the food, drugs and transportation by holding that these gifts are tax deductible as "charitable contributions" to the Red Cross.



—UPI Photo.

American Red Cross officials are working round-the-clock at headquarters here, collecting ransom supplies. Left to right: George C. Smith, director of the Red Cross supply service; Jack Slichter, vice president of the Air Transport Association of America; and Joe Poland and John Amello, also of the ATAA.

Many of the firms involved say they expected to "about break even" as a result of this.

- The Government would hold that co-operative efforts by companies to supply and ship the food and drugs would not violate the anti-trust laws.

The drug industry has been a major target of the Kennedy Administration for alleged price-fixing and anti-trust activities. A dozen major drug firms are defendants in a price-fixing action brought by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Others are under investigation.

Robert Kennedy apparently stepped into the ransom operation after a previous attempt last fall failed to get U. S. firms to donate food and drugs. It was led by James B. Donovan, the New York lawyer who has been handling the negotiations with Castro and the Bay of Pigs families committee.

Industry leaders then demanded—and failed to get—assurances that the Administration was behind the ransom attempt, which blew up with the Cuban crisis.

The President, at his last press conference, ducked a direct question as to whether he considers the ransom effort in the "national interest." He said only that he was "sympathetic."

Some industry officials said they were summoned to Washington to meet with the Attorney General and other Administration officials.

The Maritime Department of the AFL-CIO also said the Justice Department was arranging the departure time for the African Pilot—a ship chartered by the Red Cross to haul the supplies to Cuba. Unions are furnishing free labor for the ship.

Industry officials insisted they were not asked to "arm twisting" to join in

the venture. "But some asked privately: 'Can you turn down the Kennedys?'"

TWO GROUPS

Arrangements to collect food and drugs were made with two major trade groups, the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association and the Grocery Manufacturers of America.

Both Austin Smith, president of the drug group, and Paul C. Willis, president of the grocers' association, said they had dealt with the Red Cross in making arrangements for the operation.

But Mr. Smith informed his members in a special newsletter that "equipment"

Ten domestic airlines, Pan-American World Airways, 19 railroads and trucking and steamship companies are joining in the operation. Some are operating at a loss and may not be able to recover their costs.

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